

Connecticut Teacher Experiences with State SBAC Testing

Project C-TEST: Common Core
Assessments: Teaching
Effectiveness and Stress

Preliminary Findings: Report
Prepared for the Connecticut
Education Association and
Connecticut Mastery Examination
Committee

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Introduction

The purpose of Project C-TEST was to better understand the influence of test-based accountability policies on teacher wellness and stress, school climate, and instructional practices. During the 2014-2015 academic year, a large-scale survey was administered across four states (Connecticut, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Texas). Over 6,400 educators responded to a survey that asked questions about the current state of test-based accountability policies and practices in their respective states, districts, and schools. Educators reported on their stress, instructional practices, and school climate. The study included a total of 837 teachers from Connecticut public schools (13% of the total sample). The following summary presents preliminary analyses of the study with respect to both Connecticut teachers' and the whole sample of teachers' experiences with state testing programs.

Context

In the last few years, the state of Connecticut has undergone several significant changes related to educational accountability practices that have impacted teachers. In July 2010, CT adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). In May 2012, the CT Legislature passed Public Act No. 12-116 requiring the use of an approved teacher evaluation system and the State developed the System for Educator Evaluation (SEED) as a state-approved option for teacher evaluation. The Connecticut Guidelines for Educator Evaluation requires that 22.5% of the teacher evaluation be based on student scores on the state test or another standardized indicator, with growth over time considered.¹ During the 2013 - 2014 school year, both the CCSS and teacher evaluation system were fully implemented statewide and during March 2014, the CCSS-aligned state test (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium; SBAC) computer-adaptive test was voluntarily field-tested in 90% of Connecticut school districts.² The State required statewide SBAC testing for the first time during the 2014 - 2015 school year. Although the use of student test scores in teacher evaluations was also planned to go into effect during the 2014 -2015 school year, the Governor announced a one-year delay.³

Methodology and Teacher Demographics

Public school teachers were recruited to participate in an online survey assessment; email contact information was compiled from publicly accessible databases of school employees or via collaboration with State Departments of Education. The survey included empirically validated measures of teacher stress (Teacher Stress Inventory, Educator Test Stress Inventory) and School Climate (Delaware School Climate Survey). Researcher developed measures also included assessment of Environmental Test Stress, Curriculum-Related Stress due to curricular changes, and Test-Based Accountability Policies.

¹ Pryor, S. (2012). Recommendation for the adoption of the Connecticut Guidelines for Educator Evaluation. Retrieved from: http://www.connecticutseed.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Adopted_PEAC_Guidelines_for_Teacher_Evaluation.pdf

² Department of Education. (2014). ESEA Flexibility Request. Retrieved from: <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/eseaflex/approved-requests/ctrequest712014.pdf>

³ Donnelly, K. (2014). Educators receive flexibility and support as multiple reforms implemented across state. Retrieved from: http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/pressroom/educators_receive_flexibility_and_support.pdf

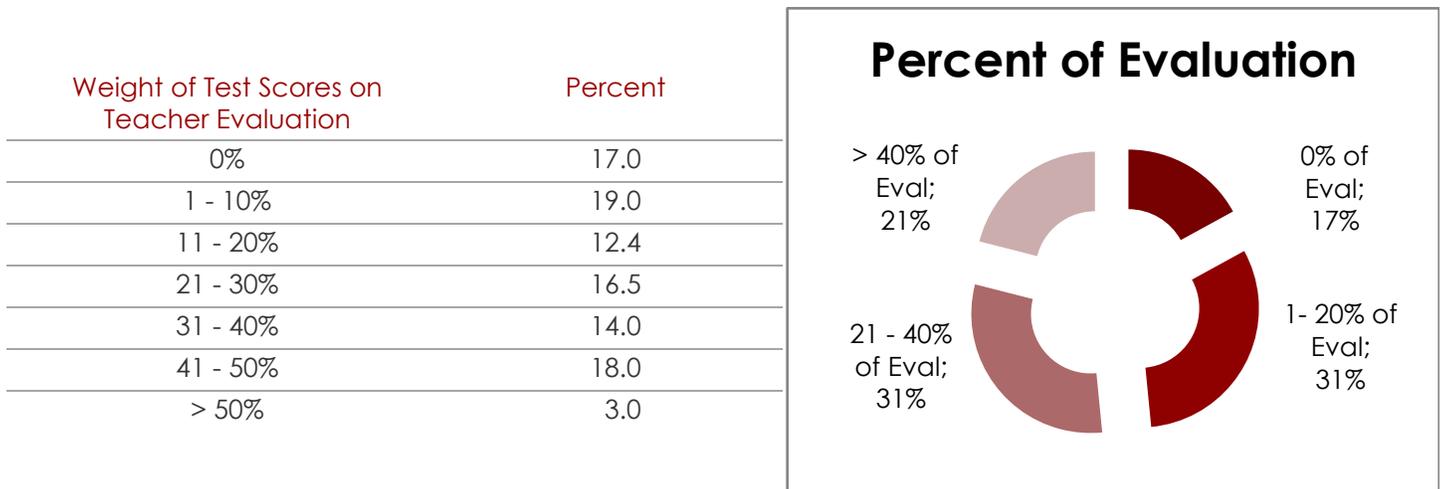
Of the participants, 1,336 (20.9%) were male and 5,045 (79%) were female. This is consistent with teacher demographics nationally. The majority of participants reported their ethnicity as Caucasian/White (83%) and 9% reporting their ethnicity as Black/African-American, 3% as Latino/Hispanic, 1% as Native American, and 2% as more than one race. According to national data from the 2007-2008 academic year, 83% of teachers identify as Caucasian/White, 7% identify as Black/African-American or Latino/Hispanic, 1% identify as more than one race and less than 1% identify as Native-American,⁴ suggesting that this sample is largely representative of the overall teacher population. The study included a total of 837 teachers from **Connecticut** public schools (13% of the total sample).

The following summary presents (a) preliminary descriptive analyses of Connecticut teachers' experiences with SBAC testing and (b) structural equation modeling (SEM) of the relationship between accountability factors and teacher stress across teachers in all four states. SEM analyses were conducted with the whole sample as similar relationships among variables were identified across all four states.

Connecticut Teacher Experiences

Perceived Use of Test Scores

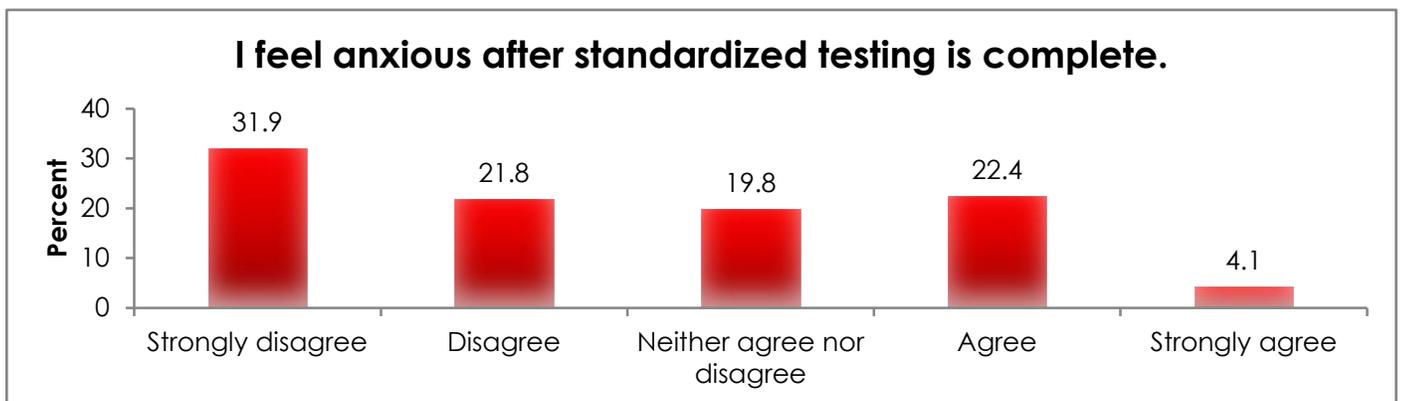
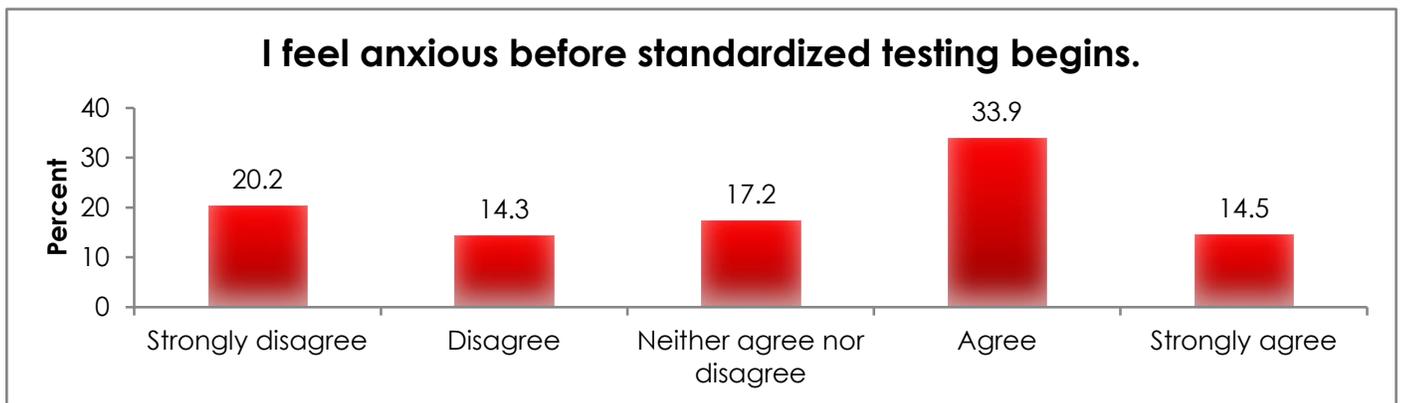
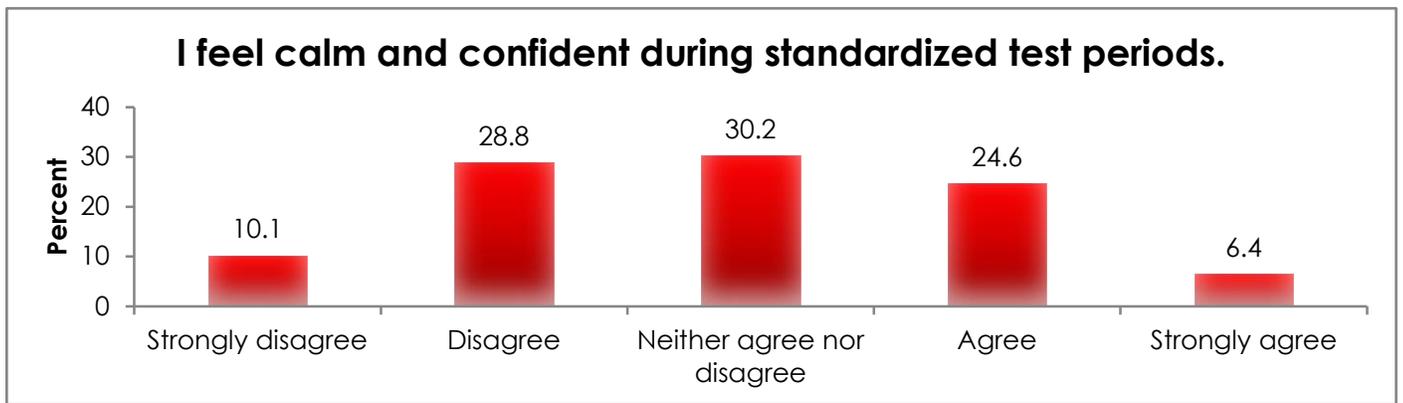
Teachers in Connecticut reported a wide range of responses as to how student test scores on the SBAC were used in their teacher evaluations. While the ESEA waiver will result in student test scores on the SBAC being omitted from teacher evaluations for the 2014 - 2015 school year, when surveyed during the Fall of 2014, more than 83% of teachers reported that SBAC test scores were part of their teacher evaluation. Further, more than half of all teachers reported that test scores accounted for more than 20% of their evaluation, indicating that a large proportion of teachers perceived student test scores as having a significant impact on their evaluations.



⁴National Center for Education Statistics. (2013). Teacher trends. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=28>

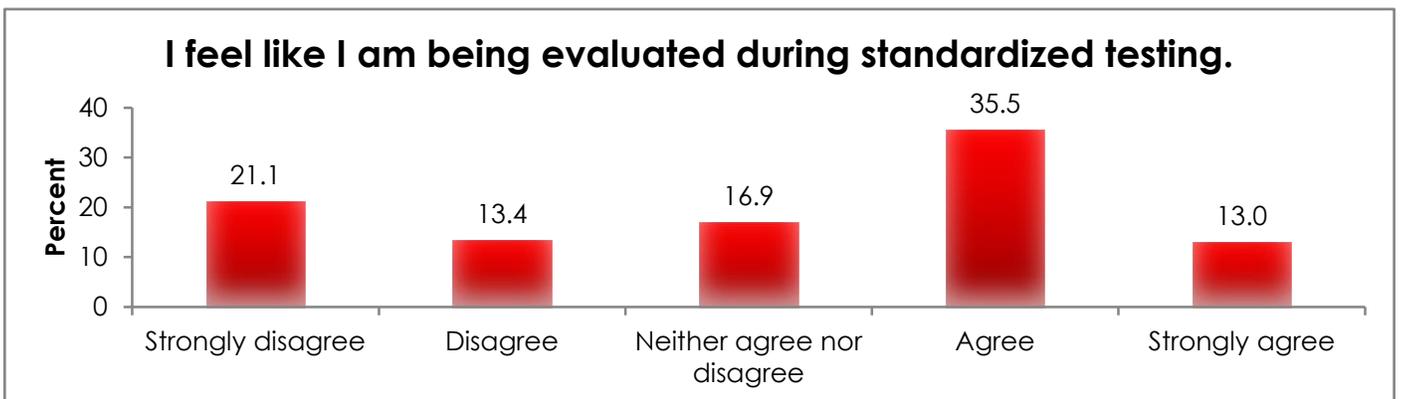
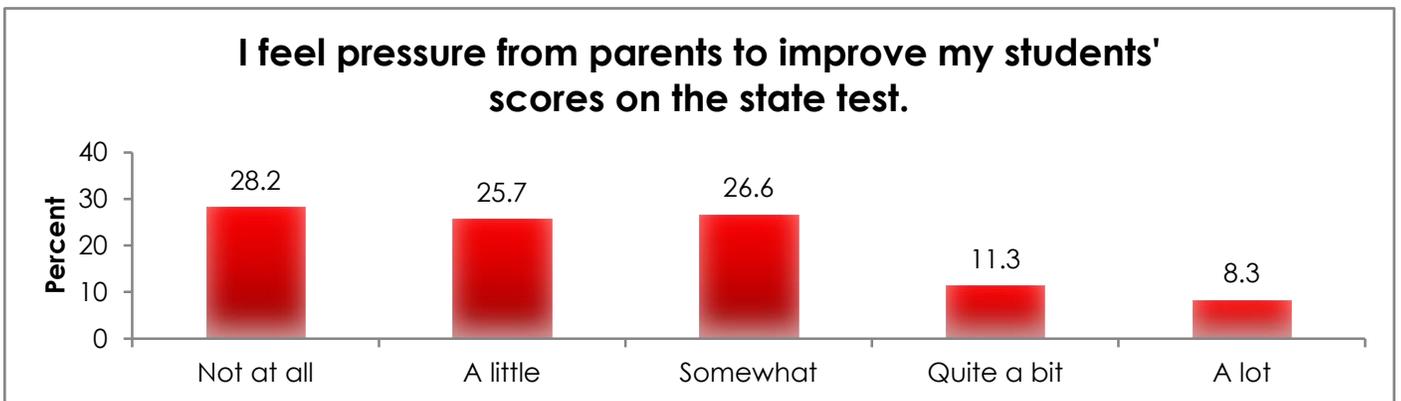
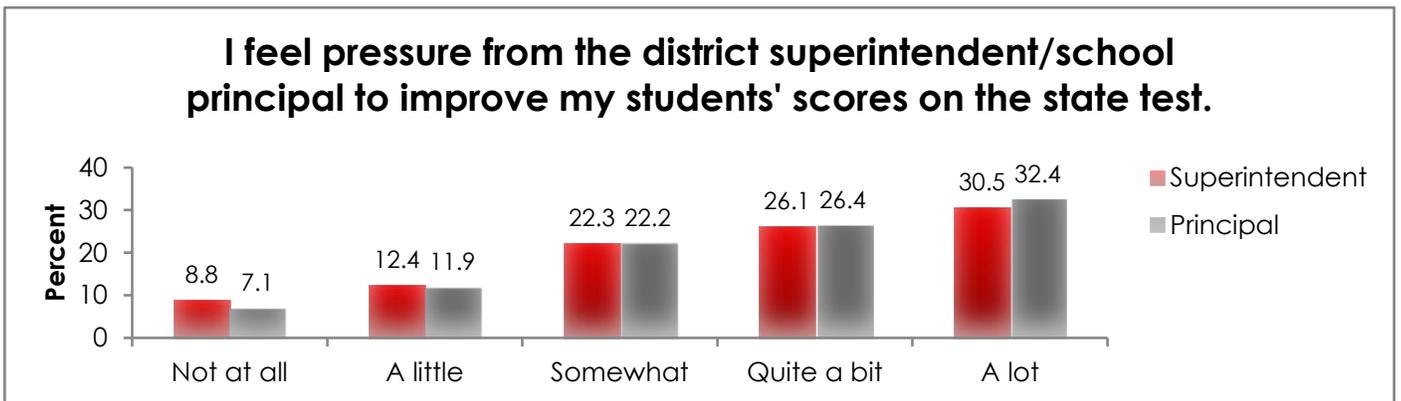
Perceived Test Stress

Overall, teachers in Connecticut reported a range of emotional stress reactions to SBAC testing. While about 30% of teachers reported feeling calm and confident during testing, almost 50% of teachers did not, suggesting that many teachers are experiencing anxiety during the standardized testing period. Indeed, 48.4% of teachers reported feeling anxious before standardized testing begins and 26.5% of teachers reported that they continued to feel anxious after standardized testing was complete.



Perceived Pressure to Increase Test Scores

Overall, teachers in Connecticut reported feeling a strong sense of pressure surrounding student performance on the SBAC. More than half of all teachers reported feeling **quite a bit** or **a lot** of pressure from school administrators to raise student test scores. Less pressure was perceived from parents. Further, 48.5% of teachers felt that standardized testing was evaluative, likely increasing the sense of anxiety teachers reported about SBAC testing.



Summary of Connecticut Findings

These findings are important in the context of SBAC administration practices and communication that administrators have with teachers regarding testing and teacher evaluation. Dr. Diana Wentzell, the Connecticut Education Commissioner stated in a *Hartford Courant* article on July 19, 2015, "Testing and assessment are a necessary part of instruction, but that's just it: they're a part of instruction. So assessment's purpose is to inform instruction. ...we need to stand together and really convince all educational stakeholders that test preparation has no place in our schools. You know, these tests are not to be prepared for. They're like taking your temperature to see if you are well."⁵ However, in contrast to this instructional improvement goal, these data suggest that the majority of teachers in Connecticut experience SBAC testing as evaluative of their teaching rather than as a process designed to enhance instruction. Teachers report sensing significant pressure from their direct supervisors to increase their students' performance on state testing. This sense may explain the high rates of reported anxiety that teachers have related to SBAC testing.

Accountability Pressure and Teacher Experiences (Full Sample)

Participants were asked three key questions about how state testing affected decisions related to their job security, pay, and evaluations. Specifically, teachers rated how much the following statements were true on a 1 ("Not at all") to 5 ("A lot") scale: "Student performance on state tests is weighted heavily on tenure decisions," "Student performance on state tests is weighted heavily on my merit pay decisions," and "Student performance on state tests is weighted heavily on my performance evaluations."

Using these questions, a model was created to predict how much accountability pressure (i.e., ratings on the three accountability questions) impacted teachers' experiences of teaching stress in general, stress specifically related to state testing, curriculum-related stress, and test stress in the school environment.

Teacher Stress and Accountability Pressures

When student test performance was more heavily used in a variety of important educational decisions (e.g., performance evaluation, tenure, merit pay), significantly higher the stress was reported by teachers. The two strongest relationships were found between increased accountability pressures and (1) teachers reporting greater perceived pressure to increase student test scores and (2) stress in the school environment about standardized testing. Additionally, greater accountability pressure resulted in teachers reporting more physiological symptoms of stress during testing periods (e.g., heart pounding, perspiring, feeling disorganized, etc). While teacher stress in general and curriculum-related stress also increased with greater accountability pressure, these relationships were less robust.

⁵ Rabe Thomas, J. (2015). Education chief outlines vision for Connecticut schools. Retrieved from: <http://www.courant.com/education/hc-connecticut-education-commissioner-20150719-story.html>

These results suggest that accountability pressures have specific impacts on test-related teacher wellness and test-related environmental stress. This aligns with conceptualizations of stress as the physiological and psychological responses that a person has to a specific perceived threat. Teachers may perceive test-based accountability policies as a specific threat that depletes their coping resources over time, resulting in a sense of stress specific to the testing program.

Summary of Accountability Pressure Analysis

Notably, the relationships identified between accountability pressure and educator perceptions of stress were consistent across all four studied states, including Connecticut. Despite differences in the states' curricula, accountability policies, testing programs, and use of student test scores in teacher evaluations, teachers consistently reported that increased accountability pressure resulted in increased pressure to increase student test scores, increased environmental stress surrounding standardized testing, and greater physiological symptoms of stress during testing periods. Further, general teacher stress and curriculum-related stress also increased with greater accountability pressures.

These findings are important as they suggest that accountability policies have both testing-specific and non-specific impacts on teacher wellbeing and the school environment. Understanding how teachers' perceive and react to test-based accountability policies is essential for considering how these policies are designed, implemented, and communicated. Recognizing specific factors that increase teacher stress and anxiety provides an opportunity to consider how to best ameliorate the unintended negative consequences that test-based accountability programs have on educator wellbeing.

Future Directions

This study provides insight into the relationship between test-based accountability policies and teacher reactions to state testing. It has particular importance because it was conducted during the Fall of 2014, which was the first year of SBAC implementation in both Connecticut and North Carolina. Future work assessing teacher wellness and educational climate will be important to understanding how teachers experience SBAC implementation over time. Recognizing that both positive and negative change can be stressful, it will be important to monitor teacher perceptions across time. This research group is actively working with a number of states to evaluate teacher stress and wellness, effective and counterproductive instructional methods, and school climate in the context of state testing. By partnering with both State Departments of Education and teacher organizations, and by actively seeking grant support, this research group is committed to understanding the psychosocial and educational impacts of accountability programs and facilitating resource development that supports educators.